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ABSTRACT

Because the attitude research approach to determining public opinion typically yields data irrelevant to public policy formation, researchers need to consider nontraditional approaches to public opinion measures. Attitude research assumes that people actually have readily measurable opinions and that each attitude can be measured singly. Measurement is directed toward uncovering a person's most preferred position. To be politically relevant, however, survey data must indicate the intelligibility of public responses; require respondents to set priorities and make trade-offs; depict what costs would be tolerated for a given policy; and distinguish degrees of political acceptability. Alternative measures include the "budget pie" technique in which participants are asked to allocate a fixed amount among different programs. A second technique involves providing participants with chips that they allocate to slots which represent government programs. Disadvantages of these methods include the amount of time required and the capacity of citizens to make resource allocations. A third approach allows respondents to select ranges of responses categorized according to acceptance, indifference, and rejection. Aggregation of data in all of these approaches is a major problem. Nonetheless, the goal should not be to measure public attitudes, but rather, political preference. (Author/KC)

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# The Politically Relevant in Measuring Public Opinion

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## Abstract

Assessing the relationship between public opinion and public policy is a central question in public opinion research. Unfortunately, because most of the opinion data we collect is rooted in an "attitude research" approach, these data are frequently irrelevant to assessing an opinion-policy relationship. To be politically relevant, survey data must: (1) indicate the intelligibility of public responses not just the reliability and validity of the responses; (2) require respondents to set priorities and make trade-offs across policies; (3) depict what costs would be tolerated for a given policy and (4) distinguish degrees of policy acceptability. In addition, the data must be aggregated else the message conveyed to leaders will be highly idiosyncratic. Survey techniques not rooted in attitude research (e.g., budget pies) are only partially successful in providing politically relevant policy preference data. In light of these problems either we must expend considerable effort re-tooling our instruments or the focus of our analysis must be changed.

Is the government enacting policies desired by the people? This is an important and frequently asked question. For those viewing democracy as popular control of public policy, this opinion-policy relationship is the fundamental question. It is also relevant for scholars concerned with government accountability. Likewise, analysts investigating representational relationships such as those between citizen and legislator must also assess the degree of opinion-policy agreement. Even practicing politicians must come to grips with this consistency issue in deciding what policy stands to take to enhance their chances of reelection. Though the opinion-policy relationship has drawn the explicit attention of only a limited number of scholars (e.g., Devine, 1970; Monroe, 1979; Weissberg, 1976), it is clearly one of the most basic issues in public opinion research.

Scholars concerned with this opinion-policy relationship have had to resolve two major problems. The first, and most basic, is the theoretical connection between mass opinion and government policy. Typical here are discussions involving the differentiation of the public (elites, "issue publics" etc.), the possible flows of influence between leaders and citizens, and the role of intervening organizations and institutions in this linkage. The second problem that has to be addressed is the measurement of public opinion. Of the two problems, this appears to be the easier to solve. Ascertaining what the public wants is treated largely as a technical problem--the perceived obstacles concern such things as sampling, question wording, scale

construction, and the proper statistical techniques to be employed. It is assumed that we know what is to be measured so energy should be therefore directed to largely technical questions of how opinion is to be ascertained.

This paper will argue that the currently popular method of measuring public opinion is largely inappropriate for collecting data on the relationship between popular preferences and public policy. Existing methods of collecting opinion data are generally incapable of telling us what the public really wants regardless of response rate, size of sampling error, or care exercized in question wording. Put bluntly, our contention is that we are looking for the wrong kind of information when we ask respondent questions like "Do you think the government should spend more (or less) money on military defense?" At best, current polling techniques yield crude approximations of the public policy desired by citizens. What is needed is a fundamental re-focusing of our opinion measurement efforts, not a technical perfection of the existing approach.

Our discussion of ascertaining what the public wants from government will be divided into two parts. First, we shall critically examine the existing approach to ascertaining public opinion. Among other things, we shall show that displaying public thinking on an issue is not identical to showing what the public wants from government on that issue. Second, some alternative approaches to ascertaining public issue preferences will be considered. This will entail suggestions on both what is to be measured and how this might be done using conventional sample surveys.

The Conventional Approach to Measuring Public Opinion

When most researchers set out to ascertain what citizens want from their government they use an approach that has its theoretical and methodological roots in what might be called "attitude research." (See Chisman, 1976, Chs 2-3 for a further analysis of "attitude research.") This "attitude research" approach is not the same thing as "survey research" though to political scientists the two are almost inseparable. "Attitude research" represents an integrated view of what people think, how this thinking can be measured and how millions of separate thoughts can be combined into collective portraits of "public thinking." "Attitude research" is a viewpoint, not a collection of measures and techniques. Like the official religion in a successful theocracy, this attitude research approach to public opinion is so deeply ingrained that most adherents are oblivious to even the idea of an alternative.

This attitude paradigm contains several elements that are important for our analysis:

1. Citizens possess--or can readily possess--numerous genuine attitudes on a wide variety of political topics, issues, or proposals. The capacity of citizens to hold a large number of "real" attitudes follows directly from the operational definitions of attitudes and their proper measurement. That is, citizen thinking cannot be directly observed or measured. But, responses generated by an external stimulus (i.e., a question) can be recorded. The character of the underlying mental state generating the response has nothing to do with the validity or reliability of the response. All that matters for the creation of valid and reliable attitude data is that the overt response

systematically corresponds to some (unmeasured, undefined) underlying mental phenomenon. Given ample opportunity to improve one's questions and a willingness of people to react, a researcher can readily show that citizens possess valid, reliable attitudes on almost every subject imaginable. Attitudes are "real" because they yield measurements that are valid and reliable. It is inconceivable from the perspective of the attitude measurement paradigm that citizens have nothing of any importance to say. As far as each citizen is concerned: "I think, therefore, I have political attitudes."

2. Attitudes are properly measured one at a time. To determine what a person thought, a researcher would ask numerous questions each dealing with a single issue topic. Of course, the responses may be grouped into elaborate structures and configurations, but such inter-relationships occur after the single attitude has been measured. Typically, a respondent is asked questions like "Do you favor increased defense spending?" or "Should more aid be given to the poor?" Only rarely are attitudes about two or more topics examined simultaneously. ("Contamination" is a serious sin in the attitude measurement approach.)

3. Attitudes are viewed as being arrayed along some dimension and the purpose of a measurement is to determine the particular point on the continuum that best reflects a person's thinking. The dimension can be in terms of agreement level with a statement--Defense spending should be increased--Strongly agree, Agree, No Opinion, etc. It could be in terms of one alternative in an array--Defense spending should be cut, not changed, increased? Perhaps even a seven point scale. In any case, however, measurement is directed to finding the

one position that best reflects what a person feels or wants given a series of choices on some dimension. Discrepancies between a person's precise position and what the measuring instrument yields exist, of course, but these discrepancies are viewed either as measurement errors or a price to be paid for simplifying highly complex issues.

4. The primary purpose of attitude measurement research is to describe in a comprehensive fashion public opinion at the individual level. This involves both the accurate sampling of the general population and the asking of as many questions as possible. Good polling can be likened to taking a series of detailed snapshots of a group with nobody left out. Answers to, say, 100 questions gives a better picture than, say, responses to 10 questions.

From the perspective of an opinion pollster these four assumptions--people do have real, readily measurable opinions, each attitude is to be measured singly, measurement is directed to uncovering a person's most preferred positions and the more questions the better the picture of public opinion--are self-evident. If, however, we were to put ourselves in the position of a public official looking to the public for guidance, a study incorporating these assumptions would usually yield troublesome or even irrelevant results. It is not that these assumptions lead to meaningless data; rather, the resultant information is often inappropriate or incomplete.

Consider the question of what constitutes a valid, reliable attitude. It is quite likely that much valid, reliable opinion poll data are invalid with respect to government action. For example, a citizen may desire a policy that is impossible to implement (e.g.,

eliminate all pollution). Or, the preference may be hopelessly vague or ambiguous (e.g., leaders should represent the people not the "special interests"). Even a seemingly valid preference may be irrelevant if it is based on incorrect premises (e.g., reduce taxes for poor people by increasing the size of the standard deduction). A valid, reliable citizen preference (from the perspective of the attitude measurement paradigm) can also be politically hopeless even if it was doable in principle and based on correct factual premises (e.g., reduce the threat of nuclear war by instituting UN supervised world disarmament). In short, valid, reliable citizen attitudes need not make any political sense.

The practice of treating attitudes as separate entities to be measured one at a time is also at odds with the types of choices confronted by public officials. To public officials, the pursuit of one policy is inevitably linked to the pursuit of other policies. While two issue domains may be conceptually distinct, they may be intimately intertwined in terms of their accomplishment. The conflict between lower consumer prices and protecting U.S. industry from cheap imports is an obvious illustration. Moreover, policies that are not inherently contradictory may in fact be mutually exclusive given political bargaining and coalition building. For example, a very liberal legislator might be able to marshall a majority for one or two liberal proposals, but it is very unlikely that vote trading could be successful for several very liberal proposals. Thus, while the usual public opinion polls allow citizens that luxury of not having to worry about contradictions, trade-offs, and bargaining, public officials do have these worries in their decisions.

Regarding the third assumption of the attitude measurement paradigm--measurement is supposed to locate an individual's single most preferred position on some dimension--this too is irrelevant to the types of choices faced by public officials. Rarely, for all sorts of fairly obvious reasons, do individual officials and governments in general expect to gain their most preferred alternative a significant portion of the time. An official viewing his or her options is likely to think in terms of best possible outcome, minimally satisfactory outcome or even least objectionable outcome. While a respondent in a typical mass survey essentially makes black or white choices, public officials usually operate in a world of numerous shades of gray. Moreover, while the goal in the attitude measurement approach is to create uni-dimenional scales, issues faced by public officials are frequently multi-dimensional. Indeed, by habit and inclination most professional politicians readily see more than one issue in what publicly is merely a single issue.

Finally, while reponses on a wide range of issues from a representative sample may be the final objective from the attitude measurement perspective, such information hardly begins to inform a decision-maker concerned with public opinion. Given the time consuming nature of changing policies, the likely long term persistence of opinions is an important (and rarely ascertained) piece of information. Obviously, just how one reacts to a public demand for increased defense spending can greatly depend on the perceived fickleness of this demand (and standard measures of question reliability hardly tap such long term endurance). In addition, typical survey items rarely provide the level of detail on just what

the public wants or how it is to be accomplished. For example, a typical survey question showing public support for greater government assistance for the poor can be interpreted to mean a call for almost any type of action--eliminating all assistance programs so as to encourage greater self-reliance to guaranteed incomes of $50,000 per year all "help the poor." Clearly, then, a public official given the results of a typical poll covering even 100 public issues is provided little (if any) intelligent guidance in giving people what they want on any one issue.

## What should opinion polls measure?

Our argument thus far is that the common public opinion poll is rooted in an attitude measurement approach and this approach readily leads to the collection of data that are largely irrelevant to the political process. As a result in most situations survey data do not (1) provide realistic messages to leaders regarding what the public wants and (2) permit a judgment on whether public preferences and government action are in agreement. What we shall suggest here are some of the things that should be ascertained by surveys if such data are to be politically relevant. Some of the problems in obtaining relevant data will also be considered. As we shall see, determining what the public "really wants from government" is far more difficult and complex than assessing public attitudes towards hundred of political objectives.

## Ascertaining Intelligable Opinion

Perhaps the first objective in a poll designed to determine what the public wants is to have some way of deciding when the public has

nothing relevant or intelligent to say. Recall that the attitude measurement approach can almost always generate reliable and valid responses on nearly any political topic imaginable (for an analysis of what people are willing to offer interviewers, see Bishop et. al, 1980 and Schuman and Presser, 1981, ch. 5). Yet, the idea of the mass public being able to participate intelligently in the debate over any government policy is clearly nonsense. At present, detecting that the public "speaks" gibberish on an issue is difficult. Contradictory response patterns, low rates of passing informational or interest filter questions, and high "Don't know" response rates are only little more than rough approximations.

Suppose analysis did start with the question "Does the public have anything intelligent to say?" rather that "What does the public say?" how does one proceed? If we begin with the assumption that the purpose of the poll is to measure what currently exists, an elaborate series of filter questions would seem the appropriate mechanisms for separating sensible from nonsensical opinion. Such questions would sort people out on the basis of such characteristics as information level, capacity to analyze policy consequences, understanding the relevant limits on decision-makers and the like. Or, if one began with the assumption that most citizens could offer sensible opinions if given a chance, each survey question would be accompanied by a crash educational course on the topic. This might include a review of pertinent facts, arguments offered by experts, and estimations of possible consequences of a given policy.

Though both strategies would yield "better" mass opinion, such improvements have their costs. Except for the simplist issues, the use

of a rigorous set of hurdles to separate sensible from unsensible opinion would probably eliminate most respondents. "Public opinion," using this approach might consist of the opinion of a quarter or less of the total adult population. Providing a crash course on an issue would surely increase the number of people with intelligable opinions, but this educational service would place heavy burdens on both interviewers and polling organizations. The precise content of such instant education could also be a troublesome issue since reasonable people can differ over such things as the possible impact of a policy, its real cost or its feasability. Being balanced and objective would not be easy.

Require respondents to make trade-offs and set priorities. A second objective in creating a politically relevant measure of public opinion is to force respondents to decide on trade-offs and order priorities. As we suggested in our discussion of the attitude measurement approach, respondents in surveys, unlike public officials, can usually make choices as if everything could be done at once. Obviously, if mass preferences and government decisions are to be compared, similar sets of constraints must apply to both. Respondents must, for example, decide whether government efforts to reduce unemployment will come before efforts to reduce inflation and at what levels will these priorities be changed.

In some ways the introduction of priority and trade-off decisions with surveys is quite simple. Questions like "Which is the most pressing national problem?" or "What should come first-safe cars or cheap cars?" are easy to ask. Yet, as was true in ascertaining a more intellagable public opinion, several problems remain to be resolved.

One such problem concerns the capacity of citizens to select priorities or make trade-offs involving important policies given virtually no attention in current political debates. For example, the federal government's financial and regulatory involvement in education is a significant policy that is almost unconsciously accepted by citizens. Few people have given serious attention to what might happen if this involvement were sharply curtailed. Indeed, even experts would be hard pressed to predict the consequences of a major policy change. How then do we ask citizens about giving up the benefits of federal money in exchange for greater local control? Can people even begin to comprehend the meaning of such a shift? Similar difficulties can easily emerge when asking citizens about altering the method of selecting public officials, major changes in methods of taxation or revamping the principles upon which U.S. foreign policy is based.

Low salience but very important policies are especially difficult to handle when respondents are given relatively unstructured opportunities to set government priorities. It is hard to imagine people telling government to stick with its on-going, non-publicized well-established functions rather than re-allocate resources into more topical, better publicized areas. For example, in the 1970s few citizens would have placed, say, maintaining a stable financial system ahead of reducing pollution on their agenda of policy priorities. Yet, it seems probable that most citizens would "really" prefer a stable financial system over cleaner air if they were somehow forced to imagine the consequences of, say, numerous bank failures, a return to unregulated bank note currency and so on. Letting citizens set priorities via surveys can easily produce a government soley concerned

with a steady stream of new well-publicized but relatively small problems. Major policies now taken for granted would be to be ignored.

Establish costs to be tolerated. Public officials know full well that there is no free lunch in enacting program. New policies must be paid for not only in money, but in negative outcomes in other areas, as well. New four lane expressway means higher taxes, the confiscation of private property, a greater likelihood of noise and air pollution, possible damage to wildlife areas, and perhaps the weakening of established neighborhoods. Such costs, while apparent to officials who must make decisions, are rarely presented to respondents on surveys. Respondents can typically select policies as if they were free, a procedure that can easily create the impression that the public is clamoring for all sorts of new programs.

As was true in asking citizens to make trade-offs and order their priorities, a solution to this problem seems relatively simple and straight-forward. One could imagine questions such as "Should the government spend $2 billion to improve our highways?" or "Would you be willing to have your taxes increased 20 dollars a year to get better highways?" Or open-ended, less structured questions could allow respondents to put their own acceptable price tags on policies. These types of questions, however, only appear to yield realistic information of what citizens are willing to pay for certain policies.

One obvious problem concerns asking people to deal with huge numbers well-beyond their comprehension. Even experienced members of Congress acknowledge the difficulty of understanding a billion dollars, let alone budgetary items that run into the tens of billions.

Simplification efforts typically also yield choices well beyond the grasp of most people (for example, should the Navy build two new super aircraft carriers or should we have ten new fully equipped hospitals). Perhaps the only way around this problem is to translate all monetary costs into sums that make sense to people--$1.98, $20, etc.

A second, and somewhat related, problem concerns getting survey respondents to distinguish between an acceptable total cost for a given policy versus an acceptable marginal cost. Consider the following two questions: "Would you be willing to have $10 of your tax money go to feed hungry school children?" and "Would you be willing to pay $10 more in taxes in order to feed hungry school children?" The first question assumes a fixed amount of tax payment and calls for allocation within that amount. Endorsements of worthy endeavors such as helping the needy are easy to make given that the tax money must be given to the government anyway. In the second case, however, the respondent is being asked to add an additional $10 to his or her tax burden. Forced with an even larger tax bill, enthusiasm for helping the needy may quickly cool.

Problems become more severe when we move away from purely monetary costs. While policy-makers are likely to recognize the non-monetary costs of a given policy, such costs are commonly unknown to typical citizens. For example, how many people are likely to think through the full costs of using more U.S. mined coal rather than imported oil? Moreover, even if such costs are spelled out by the interviewer, they may be difficult to comprehend (e.g., the costs of respitory ailments created by burning coal near cities). And, needless to say, reasonable people--interviewer and interviewee alike--can disagree over the costs

of policies. As a result, support for proposed policies may rest on quite different estimates of what these actions are going to cost. How does a public official respond to a call for action if such a call, in the official's estimation, is based upon unrealistically low cost estimates? What if this call is based on the mistaken belief on the part of each citizen that they personally can escape the costs of a policy while reaping the benefits?

Distinguish Among Degrees of Policy Acceptability. The ultimate goal of the existing "attitude" approach to public opinion measurement is to ascertain the respondent most preferred positions on an issue. To be sure, problems of question design and time limits on interviews prevent complete success, but the goal remains that of determining what a person wants most. As previously noted, one's "most preferred position" is only part of a discussion of political alternatives among public officials. Equally relevant to officials are preferences that can be given names such as "reasonably acceptable," "barely acceptable" "equally good and bad" "unacceptable" or "catastrophic." Since public officials frequently must work for less than optimal outcomes, it is only fair that ordinary citizens consider choices in terms of ranges of acceptability.

Several possible solutions exist. Respondents can simply be asked to sort policy choices into categories such as "most preferred" or "unacceptable under any condition." Or, the technique of paired comparison can be employed to uncover a hierarchy of preferences (all possible pairs of alternatives would be judged two at a time in terms of "accept" or "reject"). A related methodology is the Q sort (both paired comparison and the Q sort are described in Kerlinger 1973,

506-7, Ch. 34) A more complex solution is to ask respondents how they might react if a particular policy was put on the public agenda. Responses could range from "riot" or "immigrate" to "send financial support to advocate." Degrees of acceptability might even be put into purely monetary terms--how much of your disposable income would you be willing to spend to enact (or block) a particular policy?

Though in principle distinguishing among degrees of policy acceptability is not difficult, in practice several problems must be resolved. One such problem concerns whether people can make real distinctions among numerous non-optimal alternatives. Especially where an issue has not been carefully considered, diverse alternatives can easily be lumped together so attempts by the respondent to separate one sub-optimal preference from another will be unsuccessful ("They're all bad!"). In addition, a person's categoriation of options into, say "preferred," "acceptable" or opposed may vary according to judgments on what is politically possible. Consider the preferences of a very anti-black public official and a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The former, understanding what is possible, may view the option "make affirmative action purely voluntary" as an "acceptable" race relations policy. The Klansman, however, lacking an understanding of what could be done sees anything less than enforced re-segregation as unacceptable. Both may in fact share the identical preferences.

Finally, as several psychologists have noted (see, for example, Sherif and Hovland, 1961), judgments regarding acceptability of a particular position can greatly be affected by character of the options presented (the so called "assimilation-contrast effect").

Consider, for instance, a range of alternatives from 1 to 10 with 3 being a person's most preferred choice. Given a choice among, say, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 1 and 5 may be labeled as "unacceptable." But if the options 9 and 10 were added, options 1 and 5 may "move" towards acceptability. In other words, an unacceptable option can suddenly look a lot better when considered in the context of a truly awful alternative. Generating valid responses is further complicated by the likely absence of agreement among researchers regarding which particular policy alternatives should be included--including several extreme options could easily make almost any presently discussed policy "acceptable" to most respondents.

Create a consensus on what the public wants. Thus far we have considered what types of information had to be gathered from individuals. A useful and politically relevant technique must also aggregate this individual level data into some overall consensus. Unless this were done, public opinion would be so idiosyncratic that satisfying it would be impossible. Consider the problems faced by a public official who is told that while there is much intelligible, do-able opinion, enormous differences exist over priorities, trade-offs, what people are willing to pay and what options are deemed to be acceptable outcomes. In this situation, no course of action could please a majority. Reaching a judgement regarding policy-opinion consistency would be nearly impossible. The public must speak and speak well, but the messages must also add up to a clear preference.

Among decision-makers the problem of creating a consensus is usually solved by "politiking"--pressures, arguments, side-payments, threats of force, manipulation, and the like. Recent congressional

actions on President Reagan's proposed budget well illustrates how enormous differences of opinion can be aggregated. Individual citizens, offering their opinions independently of each other, do not face these pressures, however. Their responsibility is to say what they want from government, not provide what they believe to be a consensus acceptable to themselves and numerous other citizens whom they have never met.

Obviously, it is the responsibility of the researcher to create a consensus out of all the diversity. Using the common attitude measurement approach this consensus is acheived quite easily. Respondents can be offered dichotomous choices or responses from several questions are combined into scales and scale position can be collapsed to yield an apparent consensus. Indeed, recent years has seen an explosion of sophisticated statistical techniques designed to reduce large data structures to more manageable proportions (e.g., factor analysis, small space analysis, etc.).

Once we move away from this simple collection of attitude data, however, the means to create this consensus are less clear. How might you "combine" the responses of the following two individuals: Individual A favors spending an additional $10 billion on national defense, sees this as the nation's first priority, is willing to accept some specified level of inflation and deficit spending as a consequence and would accept a $5 billion increase as minimally acceptable. Individual B likewise favors $10 billion more for defense but only if (1) spending for social services is also increased by $10 billion, (2) these increases are funded by increased taxes on large incomes, and (3) the money is spent disproportionately in areas of

high black unemployment. Moreover, individuals B is willing to accept a zero increase as politically acceptable. Compared to summing responses across scale items, aggregation here is like adding apples and oranges.

Efforts to acheive politically relevant preference measures

Almost all the polling presently conducted is based on what we have called the "attitude research" approach. That is, respondents are given statements or questions about a particular issue and they pick one of several possible alternative options. This response, so long as it is judged reliable and valid in terms of an unobserved orientation, is considered a datum indicating what people want from government. Our contention has been that this approach typically yields data irrelevant to assessing a public opinion--public policy relationship. We shall now briefly review some non-traditional approaches to survey research that may offer help in creating politically relevant measures of public opinion.

One survey technique that holds some promise for generating politically relevant data is the so called "budget pie" technique. Several researchers have experimented with this technique and in some instances the techniques offers respondents a much more politically realistic set of circumstances than the typical poll question. Basically, a respondent is given a finite set of resources (graphically portrayed as a pie) and asked to allocate this fixed pie among different programs. The respondent is thus forced to limit demands and (implicitly) make trade-offs. For example, McIver and Ostrom (1976) in their 1972 survey of the St. Louis metropolitan area present a "pie" marked 0 through 100% and ask respondents to allocate

police expenditures or their jurisdiction among patrolling, detective work and administration. Similarly, May (1982) using telephone interviews of Walnut Creek, California residents has them allocate a fixed budget across five city supplied services (e.g., police, streets, recreation, etc.).

A more complex version of this budget pie technique is offered by Beardsley, Kovenack and Reynolds (1974). In one version respondents are given a game board with 15 slots, each representing a governemnt program (e.g., national defense, public education). Along with a brief description of each slot, existing government expenditure levels are indicated. Respondents are given 100 chips, each representing a penny of an average tax dollar and are asked to allocate these chips among the expenditure categories. In a second version respondents are given the option of adding or substracting 50 chips thus increasing (or decreasing) both overall expenditures and tax bills. Beardsley et. al. also describe a study by Hoinville (1971) that deals with priorties and trade-offs in selecting housing. Here respondents could allocate finite resources among amenities such as a quiet neighborhood, safety or travel time to work. To ensure that resources would not be allocated solely to the most attractive amenities, minimal resource allocations were also required.

Though this "cut a budget pie" has some clear advantages over the more traditional "Do you want more (or less) money spent on X?" it is not without some problems. First, it is questionable whether the technique can handle a large number of fairly specific issue choices. When dealing with something comparatively simple, e.g., factors in buying a house as in the Hoinville study described above, allocating

resources among 15 or so areas can pretty well exhaust the universe of policy choices. However, when setting priorities and making trade-offs on national issues, there are hundreds if not thousands of policy areas to consider. Perhaps the only realistic alternative is to have respondents make choices within a general issue domain. Instead of the general categories used by researcher like Beardsley et. al.--national defense vs. health vs. housing and community development--choices may be made within a category (i.e., more missiles vs. a larger standing army). Needless to say, while more realistic and yielding more precise information, this strategy side-steps crucial choices across different policy domains (e.g. guns vs. butter).

A related problem concerns the capacity of many citizens, especially those of limited education, to make even the most elementary resource allocations. McIver and Ostrom report, for example, that only about half of the respondents in low SES neighborhoods could successfully complete a budget pie involving a mere three budget items (p. 91). Evidence on the difficulty of their type of task also comes from a study conducted by Aldrich et. al. (1982). Here respondents were explicitly asked to choose between inflation and unemployment. A large number were either unable or unwilling to make this difficult choice. In short, attempts to constrain respondents by requiring explicit trade-offs may non-randomly exclude large numbers of citizens from the public in public opinion surveys.

Finally, the budget pie exercise appear to be a time consuming and relatively difficult to administer instrument. This was even true for the very simple version employed by McIver and Ostrom. A more sophisticated version such as the game used by Beardsley et. al.

would probably require one or two hours to set up and administer. Given the limited range of issue areas that can be covered by this technique at any one time, these administrative problems are not trivial.

A second non-traditional approach to opinion measurement holding some promise for generating more politically relevant data are measures that allow respondents to select ranges of responses. Perhaps the most developed of these is the one used by Sherif (see, for example, Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall, 1965). In this approach an attitude is defined in terms of a person's stands on some object, issue, person, groups, or institutions. Stands are further categorized in terms of zone of acceptance, indifference, and rejection. The inclusion of ranges in this conception of attitude means that people who, say, share a prefered position on an issue may nevertheless disagree on what are unacceptable alternatives.

The operational implementations of this measurement approach is fairly straight forward. For a given issue a range of statements going from one extreme to the other are prepared. On the abortion issue, for example, there may be a dozen statements ranging from "No restrictions whatsoever" to "Not permitted under any circumstances." No assumptions are made regarding the intervals between each statement. Repondents are instructed to read through all the statements and then sort them into the "accept," "reject" and "indifferent" categories.

A somewhat simplier approach to measuring preferences in terms of ranges is offered by Aldrich et. al. (1982). Basically, respondents were presented with the familiar CPS seven point scale

but respondents were allowed to select a range of points they accepted (indifference vs. rejection was not considered). Overall, about half the respondents made use of a range of points at least once on questions dealing with relations with Russia and government aid to minorities.

As with the cut a budget pie approach, the gain in relevant political data is not cost free. The technique developed by Sherif in particular has several drawbacks in terms of the typical public opinion poll. Like the budget pie technique, this technique may be beyond the capacity of poorly educated citizens. We say "may" because the technique seems to have been used exclusively among college populations or members of organizations. It would not be surprising to find that many people have difficulty in sorting a dozen or so statements on a single topic. Both techniques are also more time consuming and difficult to administer. Recall that a respondent must read several statements first and then given ample time to make changes.

Perhaps the biggest drawback is the problem of aggregating these type of data. Aldrich et. al., "solve" this problem by considering only the "accept" portion of the scale, giving position numerical values not substantive labels, and using mean scores in statistical calculation (i.e., 2-3 becomes 2.5). While permitting quick aggregation, such a solution detracts from the purpose of allowing people to select more than are alternative. Sherif et. al. and others using this appraoch simply show frequency distribution for each issue position. This is perfectly fine for showing how the public feels on an issue, but a more compelx anlaysis

is awkward with this wealth of percentage data.

These, then, are some of the techniques that may bring us a few steps closer to obtaining politically relevant data on what the public wants from government. It should be clear that we remain a long way from having satisfactory measures. For researchers interested in pursuing better, more relevant measures of public preferences, two areas in particular require future attention. First, as we have already indicated, while techniques such as budget pies or range type scales maybe a step in the right direction, they are not without their limitations. Considerable tinkering remains to be done. Whether these drawbacks can be resolved is very much an open question. It is entirely possible that some problems, e.g., comprehensibility to poorly educated respondents, are beyond realistic solutions.

Second, efforts must be made to measure certain aspects of public thinking usually ignored by the dominant "attitude research" approach. For example, little work has been done to define the limits of public capacity to deal with certain types of issues. Research on attitudes vs. non-attitudes, attitude stability or attitude structure does <u>not</u> address the question of whether citizen can grasp the complexities and consequences to the policy choices faced by officials. This research is crucial if we are to avoid asking citizens for preferences on topics they cannot grasp. We also know little about what costs (monetary and non-monetary) people are willing to pay for policies. It is entirely possible that citizen preferences depend greatly on perceived costs and that making people aware of these costs can substantially alter policy demands.

Conclusions and Speculations

What our analysis has argued is that there is a significant gap between the information derived from standard opinion polls and the type of data required to make accurate assessments of the policy-opinion relationship. A question like: "Should the government spend more (or less) on national defense?" yields little--if any--indication of what people want. This is true even if responses meet all the standard validity and reliability criteria. A politically relevant measure would show: (1) whether people grasp what they are saying; (2) will respondents be willing to make the trade-offs and priority re-orderings that accompany their preferences; (3) whether people will pay the necessary costs; and (4) what people are willing to accept as satsifactory outcomes. Unless this (and other) additional information is known, we can find ourselves in a situation where public officials are held accountable for meeting a public demand that is impossible to meet or is meetable in so many different ways that our assessment of consistency is meaningless.

We are not claiming that existing opinion data tells us nothing about popular preferences. Especially where a situation is fairly clear-cut, the conventional poll question can yield some relevant information. For example, a long history of surveys showing overwhelming public opposition to mandatory school busing to achieve racial integration does convey some real information to public officials. But, once we move towards issues such as choices among economic policies, changes in government social services policy, tax reform, the present of foreign policy objectives and

the like, the information conveyed by traditional polls is of very limited value.

The inadequacy of existing measures can lead the researcher to several lines of inquiry. If one assumes that politically relevant measures are both possible and desirable, the next step is to develop these measures. Rather than continue our methodological debates over such problems as question wording, use of DK alternatives, acquiescence response set, question-order effects, form of question administration and so on, we could re-focus our energies on such problems as how do we get ordinary citizen to understand the multitude of costs associated with a given policy option. In effect our methodological efforts would be directed at determining "what do citizens really want from government" not "what do citizens think politically" (the focus of "attitude research").

A second line of inquiry begins by assuming that the methodology necessary to reveal politically relevant mass preferences cannot be developed. This belief may derive from a lack of confidence in survey research technology or a very uncharitable view of the quality of citizen political thought. If this is so, how does a researcher deal with concepts such as accountability or government responsiveness? Are these notions to be abandoned? Are they to be limited to a few issue areas where poll data can be meaningful? Or, on the other hand, do we substitute election and referendum data for opinion poll data?

A third line of inquiry might be described as analyzing the politics of bad data. Let us assume that pollsters realize that the

usual messages conveyed by poll results are highly flawed. This presentation is not necessarily a conscious fraud--pollsters honestly believe that they are performing a useful public service with the best available techniques. If the data are known to be flawed, however, the question now becomes: Why does this endeavor continue with little or no effort to get more relevant data? What motivates pollsters to ask repeatedly questions about increasing or decreasing government programs when it is reasonably certain that many people do not understand the program and show little appreciation of the program's costs and benefits? Are pollsters simple-minded? Are they guilty of exaggerating the wisdom of public thinking? More interesting is the possibility that such attention to public opinion, even if poorly directed, serves to reassure people that the public's opinion is being given serious attention despite government actions to the contrary.

In conclusion, assessing the relationship between what people want and government policy requires considerable re-thinking. Until now researchers have been content to make-do with data poorly suited to telling us what citizens really wanted. Existing techniques only appear to yield politically relevant data. Once an analyst begins asking questions about what the data really show about what people want, the need for drastic changes in data collection become obvious. Such changes do not involve the perfecting of existing techniques. Our contention is that public-opinion researchers have for years operated with an inappropriate view of mass political thinking. The goals should not be to measure political attitudes. The goal should be to measure political preferences in a way that makes them relevant to the decisions faced by public officials. Only then can we make valid assertions regarding the responsiveness of government to its citizens.

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